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Healthy partisanship
By Kathryn Jean Lopez
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As Congressman Tom DeLay exited stage right earlier this month, he issued an important reminder: to love partisanship.

Yes, partisanship -- the same thing that keeps the two different sides of the aisle on two different sides of the aisle. But good partisanship.

Delivering his last speech on the floor of the House, the Texas Republican got to the heart of it. "In preparing for today, I found that it is customary in speeches such as these to reminisce about the good old days of political harmony and across-the-aisle camaraderie, and to lament the bitter, divisive partisan rancor that supposedly now weakens our democracy. I can't do that. Because partisanship, Mr. Speaker - - properly understood -- is not a symptom of a democracy's weakness, but of its health and strength."

Now, I know that statement is contrary to just about everything anyone casually thinks about public life: Find common ground. Don't get stuck on stupid bloodletting. Rise above politics.

But rough-and-tumble politics is what the Beltway is about. It's essential, and lawmakers reject it at their own peril.

I'm an "opinion journalist" and editor, so my days are about partisanship. That doesn't mean I sacrifice the truth of things simply to support these opinions. Nor does it mean I'm a my-party-is-always-right gal. But it does mean that I have core principles -- many of which I happen to share with most of the people around the office, just as those at a liberal magazine would with their editors. And you know what? While we rarely agree on much, a debate between the two sides is often a worthwhile endeavor.

As DeLay pointed out about Democrats and Republicans in his farewell speech, "On first principles ... we disagree. And so we debate -- often loudly, and often in vain -- to convince our opponents and the American people of our point of view. We debate here on the House floor. We debate in committees. We debate on television, and on radio, and on the Internet, and in the newspapers. And then every two years, we have a HUGE debate . . . and then in November we see who won. That is not rancor. That is democracy!" And if we're really debating first principles, and policy prescriptions based on them, our dialogue is never in vain.

Needless to say I'm not -- and it's not good civics to be -- for all partisanship. There is poisonous partisanship, too. The kind of partisanship that appears with even a cursory look at the congressional career of DeLay, who became known as "The Exterminator," which gave Democrats verbal artillery, using the fact that he was once a blue-collar guy killing bugs in Texas as an insult.

Fevered partisanship is bad news. In a way, this is the point of former Washington Post reporter Juliet Eilperin's new book "Fight Club Politics: How Partisanship Is Poisoning the House of Representatives" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). What leads congressmen to refer to colleagues with words like "control freak," "childish," and "whiners" and worse -- as some did when Eilperin interviewed them for her book -- are not policy differences but more likely fight-to-the-death strategy plays - an obvious overdosing on the bad partisanship, which doesn't bode well for the brand of partisanship that drives democracy.

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